

IMAGE TO MEANING
ESSAYS ON PHILIPPINE ART

Manila
ALICE G. GUILLERMO
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PREFACE

My interest in art, notably enough, was awakened not by Amorsolo and his rural genre—although his images still dominated the postwar decades—but by the artists of the School of Paris, the impressionists, the surrealists, the expressionists, and the cubists, who offered new and fascinating imagery that I eagerly pored over in books. In retrospect, I find it rather amusing that my first published piece on art centered on Cezanne when I was invited as guest columnist by the late Pete Daroy in his column in the *Philippine Collegian* in the early 1960s. Barely out of my teens, I had just come from Holy Ghost (now Holy Spirit) College and was starting to pursue a master's degree in comparative literature at the University of the Philippines. It turned out that I was in for a protracted stay because my program adviser, widely known for his anticlerical views, virtually made me repeat a large block of the entire undergraduate course. During the volatile energies of the period, I fell in with the company of the pioneering Student Cultural Association of the University of the Philippines (SCAUP) comrades with their radical mix of politics and art that would overshadow the bohemian influence of the existentialists.

After two years of teaching in the Humanities Department of U.P. Los Baños, it would be my good fortune to view the works of the old masters and modern artists in the museums of France, Italy, and Spain during my stay in France as *boursiere* of the French government to study French art history and literature at the Université d'Aix-Marseille in Aix-en-Provence. The giddy fascination with European art soon leveled off, however, as I settled down in my own culture and set myself to peruse the art of my time and place.

This book puts together a selection of art reviews and essays I wrote from the early 1970s to the present. My first art review, which was on a group show entitled *Salpukan!* held at the Red Gallery in Cubao, was published in the *Graphic* magazine on the eve of the declaration of martial law in 1972. After the period of press lacuna, I resumed writing occasional pieces in the mid-1970s, including articles for the *Archipelago* magazine, and won the Art

Association of the Philippines (AAP) Art Criticism Award in 1976. Twenty-five years later, in 2000, I was named Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) Centennial Honoree for the Arts in Art Criticism.

For me, the 1980s were marked by periods of intense weekly practice as contributing art writer to the *Observer*, the Sunday magazine of the *Times Journal* in 1982–1983, where I did art reviews and a series of pieces on folk art entailing field research. When the *Times Journal* folded up, I transferred to *Who* magazine, where I wrote not only art reviews but also book and film reviews for two years. This was followed by a year or so at *New Day* (later *Business Day*), which was generous with space and made possible rather lengthy cultural studies. After the paper's demise, I had a stint in the cramped space of *We Forum*. In 1986, I regularly contributed short essays in culture and politics on the editorial page of the resuscitated *Manila Times*, which experienced turbulence from the start. Then, for about four years in the 1990s, I temporarily stopped writing reviews because a great part of my time went to my work as area editor for the visual arts (with Imelda Cajipe-Endaya and Santiago Pilar) of the *CCP Encyclopedia of the Philippines*, with Dr. Nicanor Tiongson as general editor. During this time, I earned my doctoral degree in Philippine Studies at the University of the Philippines, with my dissertation entitled "Protest/Revolutionary Art in the Marcos Regime," which won the Chancellor's Award for Research. For a year, from 1995 to 1996, I lived in Tokyo doing research on "Modernism and Postmodernism in Japanese Art" as recipient of a research fellowship from the Japan Foundation. In a number of art conferences I presented papers and visited the cultural sites and museums in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Australia. I had visited China earlier with my colleagues of the Cultural Research Association of the Philippines, and more recently had a second trip to the cultural sites of Europe.

All through these years, I have also been teaching, at first intermittently at the different units of UP (Diliman, Manila, and Los Baños), some nine years at the University of the East, and from 1979 to the present as regular faculty member at UP Diliman, first at the College of Fine Arts, then at the College of Arts and Letters in the Department of Art Studies (formerly Humanities), where I am based.

A number of my cultural essays were published in the collection *Images of Change*, while my political essays appeared in *The Covert Presence* (1989)—both by Kalikasan Press and now out of print. My first book was the *Mobil Art Awards 1980*, followed in 1987 by *Social Realism in the Philippines*. The same subject but with a different approach and a more extended treatment was taken up in my doctoral dissertation.

In my teaching and writing experiences, I have discarded the form-and-content model where one goes over the formal elements and then proceeds to explicate the meaning or content of the work, because the model cannot sufficiently demonstrate the bridge between form and content nor show the internal relationship between the two. I have instead formulated a simple semiotic-based approach, which shows more satisfactorily how the material aspects of the work produce meaning within the whole. Also, I have discarded the concept of the "historical background" of art and culture for the idea that art/culture is situated within its sociohistorical context and that an active and continuous interaction takes place between art and its context through numerous forms of mediation.

Likewise, in my interactions with artist friends, I have shared with many of them the idea that art has a vital role to play in society and that it can be a catalyst for social change. Art is perspectival, and as Janet Wolff (1983) wrote, "situated within the coordinates of society and history." Asserting its power and presence, art at its best resists strategies of containment and co-optation, not allowing its value to be measured by the mechanical yardstick of the market. Indeed, a great thinker once warned of the alienation of all things and human phenomena, including love itself, into mere commodities. Doubtless, among the first things to be rescued from this chilling alienation is art itself.

Yet I would also like to add that my political view of art has always been interlinked from the beginning with a deeply hedonistic feeling for art. Thus, art criticism for me is not purely discursive but has always been infused with the pleasure of discovering the serendipitous insight or the calm felicities of contemplation, quickened on occasion by the *frisson esthétique*.

In this collection I draw from my essays and reviews published in different publications from the late 1970s to the present. Those from the *Observer* and *Today* are short contributions, but those from *Asian Art News* and *World Sculpture News* thrive from a larger space for analysis and reflection. The initial essay "Reading the Image" is a semiotics-basic method I have adapted to the study of the contemporary visual arts.

I would like to thank all the people who have aided and encouraged me in my work or who were part of my life at different times. From my days at the Holy Ghost College, my thanks first go to Sisters Angela and Mechtraud, S.Sp.S. From my early days at the UP, I would like to recognize my old SCAUP comrades who have carried the torch from way back.

Thanks go to my former editors in the 1980s, Yen Makabenta (*Observer*), and most especially Cielo Buenaventura (*Who*) and Leah Palma Makabenta (*NewDay/Business Day*), both admirable, progressive women, and my present art editor in *Today*, Francine Medina. Of my writer-artist friends, I would like

to acknowledge all those who kindly provided help and encouragement: Jose Joya, Cesar Legaspi, Emilio Aguilar Cruz, Onib Olmedo, Macario Vitalis, and the Kaisahan social realists. I would also like to acknowledge my friends, gallery owners Norma Liongoren, Silvana Diaz, Araceli Salas, and Didi Dee. Thanks also go to my colleagues in the Art Studies Department of the University of the Philippines College of Arts and Letters, particularly Norma Respicio and Patrick Flores.

I would like make particular mention of my editor, Ian Findlay-Brown, of two publications based in Hong Kong—*Asian Art News* and *World Sculpture News*, both of which play a leading role in disseminating information on Asian art, regionally and internationally.

My thanks also go to Emmanuel Torres, senior critic and curator of the Ateneo Art Gallery, who generously gave photographic access to the gallery, as well as to other owners of private collections who let their art works be photographed, and to Eric Liongoren who did the photographs. Many thanks are also due Esther M. Pacheco, director of the Ateneo University Press, who brought this book to realization, and Benilda R. Escutin, who spent hours on the book.

Finally and especially, I would like to thank my parents, as well as Ely, Amelia, and Billy. And most of all, here's to my partner in life Gelacio, daughter Sofia, and son Ramon "Bomen," as well as Diego and Carlos "Kotkot" Almirante for the light and joy.

INTRODUCTION

READING THE IMAGE

At every turn, we are surrounded by images on billboards, paintings, sculptures, drawings, illustrations, prints, cartoons, posters, murals, photographs, film, and computer graphics. They are conveyed through various media—oil, acrylic, watercolor, sculptural materials, film, mixed media, and others, all of which have their own techniques, processes and technical approaches to image-making. Understanding art has to do with "reading" the visual work as a re-presentation of the world, an artistic construct and signifying practice conveying a complex of ideas, feelings, values, attitudes, moods, and atmospheres that derive from world views and ideologies.

Since art is a vital part of our lives, it is important for us to know and understand it better. Exposure to different kinds of art forms and the practice of writing on art can lead to the formulation of methods of analyzing it. Thus, this introductory essay is an effort at shaping a method of analysis. It is basically a semiotic approach, which is able to show how the the material and ideational aspects are closely interlinked, if not fused, in the work of art. Likewise, this simple semiotic approach goes beyond the formalist view which limits itself to the formal premises of the work; rather, it advances a broader aesthetics in which the work is situated within the coordinates of society and history in a dynamic relationship of engagement.

I

Each visual art form has its own technical standards of excellence, involving the choice and use of a medium with its particular properties and suitable techniques. Because of this, it is necessary to familiarize oneself with the

This essay is a considerably revised and modified version of "Reading the Image," which appeared in *Humanities: Art and Society Handbook* (Quezon City: UP College of Arts and Letters Foundation, Technical Panel on Humanities, Social Sciences, and Communication, Commission on Higher Education, 1998), appendix A, 255–74.

different art mediums and techniques through the observation of processes. It is essential to understand the mediums and processes involved in art-making because these enter into the meaning of the work.

One can take a practical approach for a preliminary understanding of the visual work, such as a painting. We can begin by going through the basic documentary information about the work. This kind of information is provided by museums, galleries, and other exhibit venues in catalogues, brochures, and artist folios.

Title of the work. The title may be significant or immaterial to the meaning of the work; it is a textual element which may or may not contribute to its meaning. What is the relation of the title to the work? It can be a simple label identifying the subject, in which case it is merely a convenient naming device. At times, however, it bears an ironic relationship to the work or may carry a sly or witty comment about the work or its subject. If significant, the title adds a literary dimension to the work in the interplay of the visual and the literary.

Artist's name. This brings in biographical data: To what generation does the artist belong? Who are his peers? What were the dominant artistic trends during his active years? What is his personal background and training? Did he keep records, diaries, or did he publish statements which may shed light on his art?

Medium and techniques. First of all, this requires that the work be identified as a two-dimensional or a three-dimensional work. Two-dimensional works include drawings, illustrations, paintings, prints, posters, flat tapestries and wall hangings, mosaics, mats, textile paintings (such as batik, glass drawings, or paintings), and any other work which is reckoned in terms of length and width. All these forms resist academic hierarchization since they each have their own standards of artistic excellence.

Three-dimensional forms include sculptures in various materials, such as wood, stone, metal, glass, or they may be assemblages of found objects or junk parts. Installations made of different materials composed within a defined space also fall under three-dimensional works. Much of folk art, such as clay pottery and baskets combining design and function, are three-dimensional in form. This is also true for indigenous ritual objects made by wood carving, such as the Ifugao *bulul*.

The documentation identifies the medium and sometimes the techniques. Is the medium academic or conventional, or does it involve artistic choice to a greater degree, as in mixed media or multimedia? Likewise, there should be a keen awareness of the painting, sculpture, print, or other form not just as a completed work but also as artistic process involving particular materials and

techniques and produced under particular social conditions of production, both personal and social. It is also necessary to have a knowledge of the properties and limitations of the different kinds of media and their techniques. For materials and techniques are also conveyors of meaning and not just superficial or incidental aspects of the work. Technical innovations do not or should not exist only for themselves in the sheer interest of novelty, but should be part of the work's total meaning. The use of indigenous materials evokes the natural and familiar environment and precludes the sense of alienation experienced by ordinary viewers before artworks made from inaccessible specialist materials.

A note must be added regarding the ground of a painting. There are occasions in which the description of the ground requires greater specificity than merely canvas, paper, or wood panel. Different kinds of cloth, canvas, and wood have been used as ground at different periods and, as such, they aid in situating the work in a particular time and place. It is also useful to identify the particular kind of paper used, such as the different art papers and handmade paper produced from a wide variety of organic materials. This also goes for the pigments and coloring substances, their compositions and origins, as well as the tools used in the technical execution. It is likewise important to note that with the advances in communications technology, art media are continually being enriched, as in the use of computers in digital imaging.

Dimensions, or measurements. Two-dimensional works are measured in length and width; three-dimensional works, in terms of length, width, and volume. The dimensions as now measured in the metric system may be large scale, mural size, big, average, small, or miniature size. The extreme poles of very large and very small are usually significant to the meaning of the work. One of the smallest paintings on record is that painted on a grain of rice. In the nineteenth century, miniature paintings of religious subjects and secular portraits enjoyed a fashion. The historical and mythological paintings of the European academies, abstract expressionist works, and street murals are large in scale. Some large-scale works are meant to envelop and saturate the spectator in color fields; others seek to draw the viewer into the dynamic movements within the painting. Murals that have an essentially public character seek to address a large open-air crowd regarding issues and concerns of social and political importance. In the case of installations, however, dimensions may be variable in relation to their different sites.

The format of the work is part of its dimensions. The usual rectangular format of a painting may not hold any significance. Symbolism may come into play, however, in a square, circular, or irregular format. A modular sculpture with exchangeable elements may manifest architectural concepts.

Montagelike, with the influence of the cinematic image, the painting may consist of several panels in juxtaposition. Some contemporary works may borrow the format of early Renaissance paintings, as in diptychs or triptychs or with a principal image bordered by a predella, or sections portraying a narrative sequence.

Date of the work. The date, often the year, in which the work was completed situates the work in a period and provides the historical context of the work. What were the predominant issues, concerns, and trends of the period? The work is viewed in relation to works of the same period by the same artist or by other artists. Likewise, it provides information as to what period of the artist's development the work belongs, whether to the early, middle, or late period of his or her career. Finally, the date of the work situates it in art history: Does it belong to a particular trend, school, or movement? What does it contribute to art history?

Provenance. This is indicated by the name of the present owner or collector of the work; it can belong to a museum, gallery, or part of a private collection. A work, in fact, should have a record of provenance from the present owner to former owners and to the artist.

Of course, one may not immediately find the answers to all these questions. Understanding a work of art may involve a great deal of research. Moreover, the meaning of an important work can grow with time, as viewing it becomes a process of continual discovery which is part of the pleasure that art gives.

II

Let us begin with the basic premise that there are two interrelated aspects in the study of art. The first is that art has its specificity, that is, its particular language or vocabulary that has to do with the media, techniques, and visual elements of art and that constitute it as a distinct area of human knowledge and signifying practice. This is not just what is commonly called the formal aspect of art, but it is what constitutes art as a particular human activity different from the others. The other aspect is that art, while it has its specificity, is at the same time historically situated and shaped by social, economic, and political forces. Both these aspects need to be taken into account to be able to fully understand and appreciate art. For a study of the formal elements alone will not lead to a full understanding of the work, in the same way that the exclusive study of the social determinants risks collapsing the artistic into the sociological. A visual work as an iconic or pictorial sign has a unique and highly nuanced meaning, and this uniqueness and semantic richness arise from the original use of the elements and resources of art. Needless to say, the meaning, signification, or system of significations of a work is not statemental, nor is

the understanding of a work a reductive process that reduces meaning to a summary, statement, or single insight or message. Meaning in art is a complex of intellectual, emotional, and sensory significations, which the work conveys and to which the viewer responds, bringing in the breadth of his cultural background, artistic exposure and training, and human experience in a dialogic relationship with the artwork. One may speak of a work's "horizon of meaning" (Eagleton 1991), implying a range of possible significations that a work may accommodate, at the same time that it suggests semantic parameters.

The analytic study of the various elements and material features of the work should lead to a more stable and consensual field of meaning, away from erratic, whimsical, purely subjective, and impressionistic readings.

III

Having taken note of the information provided by the basic documentation of the work, we then proceed to the four planes of analysis: the basic semiotic, the iconic, the contextual, and the evaluative planes.

The Basic Semiotic Plane

Semiotics here is used in its basic formulation for the study of "signs." Here the work of art is the iconic or pictorial sign. A sign consists of a "signifier," or its material/physical aspect, and its "signified," or nonmaterial aspect, as concept and value. Related to these is the "referent," or object as it exists in the real world. A visual work, whether it be a two-dimensional pictorial plane or a three-dimensional body, is an embodiment of signs in which all physical or material marks and traces, elements, figures, and notations, are signifiers that bear a semantic or meaning-conveying potential and which, in relation to each other, convey concepts and values which are their signifieds. Their semantic potential is realized in the analysis or reading of the integral work.

The basic semiotic plane covers the elements and the general technical and physical aspects of the work with their semantic meaning-conveying potential. It includes (1) visual elements, (2) choice of medium and technique, (3) format of the work and (4) other physical properties and marks.

Visual elements. These refer to line, value, color, texture, shape, composition in space, movement—and how they are used. Each element has a meaning potential that is realized, confirmed, and verified in relation to the other elements forming the text of the work. While the elements usually reinforce one another, there can also exist contrasting or contradictory relationships, which may be part of the meaning of a work. The elements and all material features are thus to be viewed in a highly relational manner and not isolated or compartmentalized.

Choice of medium and technique. In contemporary art, medium enters more and more into the meaning of the work. While the European academies or salons of the nineteenth century decreed the choice of medium, today the artist exercises free choice in this respect, a choice determined less by its availability as by its semantic potential. For instance, handmade paper with its organic allure, irregularities of texture, and uneven edges is favored by a number of artists because it bears significations conveying the uniquely personal, human, and intimate, in contrast to mass-produced standard paper. Technique, of course, goes hand in hand with the nature of the medium. Likewise, there are techniques that valorize the values of spontaneity and the play of chance and accident, while there are those that emphasize order and control.

Format of the work. The very format of the work participates in its meaning. Again, in contemporary art, format is no longer purely conventional but becomes laden with meaning. For instance, the choice of a square canvas is no longer arbitrary but enters into the meaning of the work as a symbolic element, the square signifying mathematical order and precision.

Other physical properties and marks of the work. Notations, traces, textural features, marks (whether random or intentional) are part of the significations of the work.

The elements of the visual arts derive their semantic, or meaning-conveying potential, from two large sources, namely, (1) human psychophysical experiences (psychological and physical/sensory), which are commonly shared; and (2) the sociocultural conventions of a particular society and period (Matejka and Titunik 1976). As human beings, our sensory and physical experiences in general are intimately fused with our psychological conditions and processes. Among our basic psychophysical experiences involve those of the changing light of day and night, of warmth and cold, of weight or gravity, relative distance, pleasure and pain, with the complex intellectual and emotional associations that go with these. Because of these humanly shared experiences, it is often possible to arrive at a general agreement of what these elements and their usage convey in a work of art.

The semantic potential of line, for instance, does not merely lie in its orientation as horizontal, vertical, diagonal, or curvilinear, but also in its very quality, its thickness or thinness, density and porosity, regularity or irregularity, its production by even or uneven pressure on a surface, as well as qualities determined by the instrument producing it. A line made by a technical pen signifies a set of concepts and values different from that made by a stick of charcoal. Likewise, the different orientations of line derive their meaning from the positions of the body. Asleep or at rest, one is in a horizontal position; in

readiness, vertical; and in action, diagonal. In dance, one creates curved lines in space with one's body and limbs.

Our sense of tonal values from light through shades of gray to dark comes from our experience of the cycle of night and day, from early dawn through the gradual series of light changes in the course of the day until evening to darkest night. These changes in the light and dark of our environment have always affected us psychologically; in general, dawn ushers in bright optimism, while night creates a sense of mystery, melancholy, and respite. In our perception of color around us, warm hues that seem to advance are associated with human warmth, congeniality, openness, and spontaneity, while cool hues that seem to recede are associated with remoteness, self-containment, quietness, and restraint. Shapes are also linked to our physical experiences. Geometric shapes, whether two- or three-dimensional, are measurable and circumscribed. Organic shapes are drawn from natural living and growing forms, while free shapes project, expand, and contract in all directions. Texture is associated with experiences of pleasure and pain, pleasantness and unpleasantness, in tactile sensations of hard and soft, smooth and rough, silky and gritty. Movement in the visual art, whether implied or actual, parallels human experiences of movement with our own bodies or in relation to things around us. Rhythm is part of the body's processes as an organic whole. Our sense of composition is affected by gravity and the relative weights of things, as well as our physical experience of bodies massing, crowding, or in isolation and apartness. It is also determined by our sense of the relationship between figures or objects, as well as between figures or objects and their ground, as well as the intervallic spaces within a given design or field. While allowing for a range of differences in sense perception due to geography and climate (tropical or temperate), it is possible to assume a certain degree of universality in the human response to the elements of art.

Just as important, the meaning-conveying potential of the elements also comes from their sociocultural context with its conventions and traditions. Social conventions involve social codes and symbolic systems commonly shared by members of a society or group. Codifying systems include those of color, for instance, where apart from the significations drawn from the basic psychophysical associations, they acquire socially derived meanings. For the various hues possess differential semantic inflections in different societies. A common example is black, which is the color of mourning in Western or Western-influenced societies, while it is white in many Asian societies. Likewise, groups and societies have their own chromatic codes that have to do with the range of hues with their tones and saturations that operate in their art with prevalent or favored color combinations. For instance, the chromatic code used by artists in urban areas has been largely determined by the standard sets of colors industrially produced in the West. On

the other hand, the chromatic codes of the cultural communities are determined by their lore of local dyes derived from available plants and minerals. Each cultural community has its own particular chromatic code because it has its own lore of dyes, although there may be general similarities between a number of communities. By bringing out the distinctiveness of each, one does not lump indigenous artistic qualities into one homogenous category.

Conventions may also include formats, as in the Chinese horizontal or vertical hanging scroll. The different writing conventions in different societies may influence composition in space. Also important are cultural conventions in the use of space that is linked with world views. There is, for instance, the dialogue between figure and space in the arts of China and Japan, on one hand, and the phenomenon of horror vacui in the arts of India and Southeast Asia, on the other. In abstract art, it is the basic semiotic plane which alone operates in general, but in figurative art, one proceeds to two other planes.

According to de Saussure (1974), meaning is produced from the interplay of the signifiers of the work. Following this, a number of observations arise. The first is that artistic analysis takes into account not only the elements but also other material aspects, such as dimension, format, medium, frame, and techniques, as signifiers or conveyors of meaning. The second is that there is developed a finer and more sensitive perception of the elements as they are specifically and materially found in a particular work. Line, for instance, is not just seen in its vertical, horizontal, or diagonal orientation, but is examined in its particular properties of density, porosity, relative sharpness, and other such matters. Third, the elements are not studied in a sequential and compartmentalized manner but in a highly relational and interactive way in which the use of line, color, texture, and composition in space confirms or verifies meanings or creates semantic relationships of similarity or contrast. And fourth, the signifiers go hand in hand with their signifieds, and thus one does not limit oneself to a description of the elements in the way they are used; one, instead, links their particularities of usage with their primary significations based on human psychophysical experiences, as well as with their intellectual and emotional associations within the society. In the images of art and the media, the use of the elements affects us subliminally or unconsciously and, especially in the media, is part of what have been called the "hidden persuaders" that influence choice and behavior. However, it is in art criticism that we become highly conscious of the means and their effects and what they signify. It is also in semiotic analysis that we work within the specific language of art. In contrast, the classical approach often overlooks the basic language of art and bears heavily on the image, its iconography and descriptive details, as well as its iconology and its narratives.

The Iconic Plane, or the Image Itself

This level is still part of the semiotic approach since it is still based on the signifier-signified relationship. Here, however, it is not the material elements of the work that are dealt with as in the basic semiotic plane; it has to do with the particular features, aspects, and qualities of the image, which are the second-level signifiers. The image is regarded as an "iconic sign," which means—beyond its narrow association with religious images in the Byzantine style—that it is a unique sign with a unique, particular, and highly nuanced meaning, as different from a conventional sign, such as a traffic or street sign that has a single literal meaning agreed upon by social convention.

The iconic plane includes the choice of the subject, which may bear social and political implications. An example in art history is the French realist artist Gustave Courbet's choice of workers and ordinary people in his paintings, instead of the Olympian gods and goddesses or heroes from Greek and Roman antiquity that were the staple of classical and academic art up to the nineteenth century. We can ask the questions: Is the subject meaningful in terms of the sociocultural context? Does it reflect or have a bearing on the values and ideologies arising in a particular place and time?

One proceeds to consider the presentation of the image and its relationship to the viewer. If the subject is a human figure, does it address the viewer directly or is it self-contained or self-absorbed? What kind of subject-viewer relationship is implied by the subject through his facial expression, body language, costume and accessories, natural or social background? Is it a relationship of peers or one of dominance and subordination? Is it a friendly, ironic, aggressive, or hostile relationship, and all possible nuances thereof? Most examples of Philippine genre, for instance, are based on the concept of the stage or tableau that is oriented toward a large public audience, which it seems to address directly—a mark of the social cohesiveness of rural peasant society as well as of the extended Filipino family system in which all members of society have their kinship appellations. John Berger, in his *Ways of Seeing* (1972), has an engrossing study of paintings, with the female nude as subject, in which he demonstrates sexist attitudes toward women from the implied male viewer.

Also part of the iconic plane is the positioning of the figure or figures, whether frontal, in profile, three-fourths, and so forth, and the significations that arise from these different presentations. Does the painting show strong central focusing with the principal figure occupying the center space, or is it decentered and the painting asymmetrical in composition? How do these presentations contribute to different meanings? Does the subject or subjects have a formal or a casual air? How does one describe the central figure's stance: poised, relaxed, indifferent, provocative, or aloof? How much importance is given to psychological insight

into character by the artist? To costume and accessories? To the setting—natural, social, or domestic? What is the relative scaling of the figures from large to small? What bearing does this have on the meaning of the work? Luna's *Tampuhan* (1895) brings to the fore the artist's sensitivity to body language. How do the postures of the man and the woman convey their emotional attitudes?

In portraits, where is the gaze of the subject directed? This is important not only in defining the relationship of subject and viewer but also in describing pictorial space. Degas's *Woman with Chrysanthemums*, for example, shows a middle-aged woman beside a large vase of flowers. More important, her intense and scheming look projects an imaginary line to a figure or figures that are the objects of her gaze outside the pictorial field of the painting into an implied open and expanded space.

Is there cropping of the figure or figures? What is the significance of the kind of cropping used? Some kinds of cropping are intended to create a random, arbitrary effect as against the deliberate and controlled. Other kinds isolate a segment of the subject, such as the hand or the feet, in order to draw attention to its physical qualities—when a part stands for the whole, a peasant's bare feet can tell us about an entire life of labor and exploitation. Likewise, some artists use cropping as a device to imply the extension of the figure into the viewer's space.

Here one also takes into account the relationship of the figures to one another, whether massed, isolated, or juxtaposed in terms of affinity or contrast. A painting may expand or multiply its space by having not just one integral image but several sets of images in montage form, from the same or different times and places. These may occur in temporal sequence to constitute a narrative or may take the form of simultaneous facets or aspects of reality. Serial images showing an image multiplied many times, as in Andy Warhol's Campbell Soup cans, convey significations arising from the blatant consumerism of advanced capitalist societies.

The style of figuration is an important part of the iconic plane. The figurative style is not mere caprice, passing fashion, or the artist's personal *écriture*; beyond these, it implies a particular re-presentation or interpretation of the world, a world view, if not ideology. Classical figuration basically follows the proportion of 7 ½ to 8 heads to the entire figure in its pursuit of ideal form, as in a formal studio portrait with the subject enhanced by makeup, all imperfections concealed. Realist figuration is based on the keen observation of people, nature, and society in the concern for truth of representation, thus creating portraits of individuals without glossing over physical imperfections and defects or exposing the environmental squalor that arises from social inequities. Impressionist figuration is fluid and informal, often catching the subject unaware like a

candid camera. Expressionist figuration follows emotional impulses and drives, thus often involving distortion and clashing colors that come from strong emotion. The viewer, however, should not be too anxious to find precise stylistic labels, for contemporary art has seen the development of highly original styles that have gone far beyond the turn-of-the-century styles of the School of Paris. It is important to be sensitive to the meaning-conveying potential of highly individual and contemporary styles. In the basic semiotic plane, which deals with the material aspects of the work, and in the iconic plane, which deals with the aspects of the image itself, one can see that as the signifier cannot be separated from the signified, concrete fact or material data cannot be divorced from value; in other words, as Janet Wolff (1983) asserts, fact is value laden and value, or ideological meaning, is derived from material fact.

The Contextual Plane

Here one proceeds from the basic semiotic and iconic planes and the knowledge and insights one has gained from these into the social and historical context of the work of art. Resituating the work in its context will bring out the full meaning of the work in terms of its human and social implications. The viewer draws out the dialogic relationship of art and society. Art sources its energy and vitality from its social context and returns to it as a cognitive force and catalyst for change. If one does not view the work in relation to its context—but chooses to confine analysis to the internal structure of the work—one truncates its meaning by refusing to follow the trajectories of the work into the larger reality that has produced it. One precludes the work from reverberating in the real world.

As has been said earlier, the meaning of a work is a complex that involves concepts, values, emotions, attitudes, atmospheres, and sensory experiences that arise from the three planes. The experience of a work cannot be reduced or paraphrased in a statement, such as a moral lesson or message, but is a total experience involving the faculties of the whole person—not just his eyes or his senses, but his mind and emotions as well. The work of art has its horizon of meaning that is narrower or larger depending on the degree of visual literacy, cultural breadth, art exposure and training, and intellectual and emotional maturity of the viewer. Art involves cognition or learning; it is an important way of learning about people, life, and society. Does the work expand our knowledge of reality as a whole? Is its experience insightful and transformative with respect to living in the world?

A broad knowledge of a society's history and its economic, political, and cultural conditions, past and present, is called upon in the contextual plane. With this comes a knowledge of national and world art and literatures,

mythologies, philosophies, and different cultures and world views. The work of art may contain references and allusions, direct or indirect, to historical figures and events, as well as to religious, literary, and philosophical ideas and values that are part of the meaning of the work.

The different symbolic systems, which are culture-bound, also come into play. Although we have been strongly influenced by Western symbolic systems, we have to move toward a greater awareness of our many indigenous and Asian/Southeast Asian, Malay animist, and Islamic symbolic systems that must be valorized as they are part of our social context. These systems may have to do with color, shape, design, as well as cultural symbols associated with the belief systems of the different ethnic groups. Figures may also have rich and distinct intellectual and emotional associations built around them in the course of the history of a group.

The contextual plane likewise situates the work in the personal and social circumstances of its production. The work may contain allusions to personal or public events, conditions, stages, as well as influences (such as persons and literary texts) that have been particularly meaningful to the artist. Themes and subthemes may be derived from personal life experiences significant to the artist and particular biographical data may play an important part in understanding the work and its view of reality.

The work is firmly situated in a particular society and time, "in its social and historical coordinates" (Wolff 1983). The work is viewed or studied in relation to its epoch, to the prevailing world views, ideologies, issues, concerns, trends, and events of the day. It situates the artist with respect to the debates of his time. The work may have allusions or references to the personalities and events of a particular period, and convey attitudes of espousal, approval, indifference, or rejection with respect to these for the work of art conveys values, artistic, religious, social, or political. Art then is not value-free. All art contains values of one kind or another. Abstract art, likewise, may express world views and values, as Mondrian's abstraction, for instance, conveyed his neoplatonism, as he considered his paintings symbolic of the underlying harmony and order in the universe. On the contrary, Pollock's gestural abstraction places value on spontaneity and the release of kinetic energy and nonrational impulses. Values—such as spontaneity as against discipline and order, mystery and elusiveness as against clear definition, informality as against the formal, transitoriness as against permanence—may be found in abstract art, at the same time that these can be viewed in the light of the intellectual trends of the time.

Finally, a single work of art is often more completely understood when it is viewed in the context of the artist's entire body of work, when it is juxtaposed

and compared on the semiotic, iconic, and contextual planes with works of artists in the same period, in different periods of his career, and then with the work of his contemporaries. This is because the meaning of one work may become part of a larger body of work or of an integral artistic vision. In comparative intertextuality, the work of art reveals its numerous ramifications of meaning, at the same time that it is related to its referents in the real world.

The Evaluative Plane

The evaluative plane has to do with analyzing the values of a work. After the understanding of the work is the difficult task of evaluating it. Often, it is facile to say that evaluation involves the two aspects of form and content. However, this division is theoretically conservative since the two are regarded as conceptually separate. It is semiotic analysis involving the basic semiotic plane, the iconic plane, and the contextual plane that shows how meaning is produced through the interrelationship of the signifiers (material features) and signifieds (concepts, values) in the unique pictorial sign that is the work of art. At all points, meaning is anchored in material form. Again, empirical, physical fact is value-laden, and value and meaning ensue from material fact. Thus, the first consideration in evaluation would be to what degree the material basis of the work conveys meaning or particular intellectual/emotional contents.

The evaluation of the material basis of the work reckons with standards of excellence in the use of the medium and its related techniques. Some questions may be posed. Is the medium (which includes surface, ground, or material block, instruments, tools, pigments—all these calling for appropriate techniques) used with a high degree of artistic skill, creativity, and insight? Was the particular medium chosen as most appropriate in conveying general or specific significations? With respect to medium, the viewer/critic rejects the traditional hierarchies laid down by the nineteenth-century academies in which oil on canvas and sculpture in marble were considered superior to other media. For all visual forms—whether paintings, prints, posters, illustrations, cartoons, and comics—observe standards of technical excellence to which a work may be on par or below par. Understanding and evaluating the technical side of the work requires a familiarity with and sensitivity to the properties of medium. Thus the viewer/critic should devote time to researching on and observing art making, even doing exercises or producing his or her own work. At the same time, one must be open to the transgressing of conventional processes and norms in the quest for new creative and expressive resources.

The traditional and usual consideration of form touches upon the principles of organization, which are traditionally identified as rhythm, harmony,

balance, and proportion. One has to bear in mind, however, that these tenets were laid down by the European classical academies to preserve the hierarchic order of monarchical society. In their philosophical framework the ideals of harmony, balance, and proportion were not only aesthetic values but also sociopolitical values decreed as "in the nature of things." The problem is that these values, while they retain a continuing but limited validity, are often erroneously absolutized as the ultimate objectives of art.

As has been stated, the meaning of a work is a complex of concepts, values, and feelings, which derive from human life and the real world and have a bearing upon them. Thus, an important aspect of the evaluation of a work necessarily includes the analysis and examination of its significations and values that become fully articulated on the contextual plane, although these had already been shaping up on the basic semiotic and iconic planes. And since values are expressed in the work that holds a dialogic relationship with reality, the assessment of these values is a necessary part of critical evaluation. Now, the values of the artist as conveyed in the work and those of the viewer may coincide in mutual agreement or may not quite coincide or may even be contradictory. There exists, of course, a whole range of attitudes on the part of the viewer/critic to the work, from full espousal and enthusiastic agreement at one pole, through degrees of appreciation and indifference growing toward annoyance and to vigorous rejection at the opposite pole.

It becomes clear that, on one hand, the artist is not or should not be a mere technician but expresses a view of life in his work. On the other hand, the viewer/critic is also not a mere connoisseur confined to the analysis of the elements, techniques, and processes. The viewer/critic is one who must have, after long reflection and experience, arrived at the formulation of his own value system, his view of the world and humanity he has come to feel deeply and even strongly about. As the artist enjoys artistic independence, the critic/viewer also enjoys his own autonomy. For, to be sure, the critic is not an appendage of the artist or a promoter or publicist, but one who vitally contributes to the dynamic dialogue, interaction, and debate in the field of art and culture as these intersect with other human concerns—the political, social, and economic.

An underlying premise then is that the viewer of art, in particular the art critic, needs to have thought out fully his own values by which he or she lives as a total human person. The artist likewise creates art not as a fragmented human being or purely technical specialist, but as a total thinking and feeling individual. If the critic simply describes and appreciates the work's technical excellence, if it is indeed worth appreciating on this level, and stops short of making value judgements, then he isolates the work from its larger social

environment—in which case, he divorces art from life and its concerns and promotes the condition of art feeding upon itself. Yet, when the critic evaluates the work relative to his own philosophy and vision of life and the world, he is only fully realizing the dialogue between the work and the viewer, after completing the process of semiotic reading, understanding, and contextualizing the work.

Since art directly or indirectly conveys meaning and seeks to influence one's ideas and values in subliminal ways, then it is but an essential role of the viewer/critic to be able to recognize these subtle semiotic devices and to articulate these and bring them to light. As the critic/viewer fully recognizes and respects the prerogative of the artist to express his ideas and feelings, the former also reserves the right to agree or have reservations with respect to the work in relation to his own values and view of the world. It is to be pointed out, however, that it is possible for a critic to understand and appreciate a work viewed in its specific sociocultural context without necessarily espousing its ideas, in the same way that one can deeply appreciate a Zen work of art without being a Zen Buddhist oneself. However, in contemporary art produced in the context of our time and place, the expression of the critic's differential view is not to be construed as a manipulative strategy but as only bringing out alternative viewpoints in the dialogic relationship of art and viewer, art and reality.

Indeed, the responsible viewer/critic draws from a rich fund of knowledge and humanism. The Filipino art critic may uphold values reflecting the quest for national identity and placing premium on the people's interests vis-à-vis foreign interests that seek to dominate our national life. The democratization of art may be promoted in themes that enhance the sense of human dignity especially of those engaged in basic production and that espouse liberative causes and projects. Democratization can also be carried out in the use of popular forms and media that make art accessible to the larger number. There is, likewise, a liberative thrust in themes that espouse the cause of traditional marginalized sectors, such as women and children, as well as non-Christian ethnic and Muslim groups in the Philippines. The critic may uphold the role of art as an emancipating influence rather than as pure commodity or decoration catering to the elite.

Yet what if, as may sometimes be the case, interpretations of the work by different critics do not coincide or are contradictory? Does this mean then that our critical process is unreliable? There may be a general consensus on the basic semiotic and iconic planes, but differences may lie in the contextual and, especially, in the evaluative plane of analysis. This is so in all class societies riven by conflicting interests, such as ours, it is only to be

expected that artists and viewers/critics adhere to diverse value systems that coincide, overlap, or are in opposition, thus affecting the way they make art or look at art.

Thus, after the critic/viewer has gone through the four planes—the semiotic, the iconic, the contextual, and the evaluative—it is possible to determine the semantic focus and parameters of the work and from these project its horizons of meaning, its boundaries and limitations, its semantic implications and ideological orientations, its conservative or transformative tendencies with respect to human life and society. The critic/viewer thus arrives at a more focused understanding of the work of art which, while it has a semantic core, has parameters that are fluid and continually being expanded and elaborated on in the ever-continuing dialogic experience of art.

JOSE TENCE RUIZ

PROCESSES OF CHANGE

Against the backdrop of political ferment and economic instability that mark the Southeast Asian region today, there are quite a number of artists who negotiate the delicate balancing act between art as social critique and as formal reinvention. Jose Tence Ruiz (b. 1956) counts among this hardy breed. For the last three decades, he has produced work in practically every current form and medium to which he has brought his own distinctive innovations. He has exercised his ample creativity on a wide-ranging field, including contemporary issues, folk psychology, and indigenous world views. For him, art is a critique of the social order—reared as he was in the local tradition of social realism—but it is a critique leavened with wit, humor, and the spirit of adventure and challenge. His sizeable oeuvre includes drawings and illustrations, paintings, assemblages, installations, and digital imageries in all kinds of material, academic or traditional, organic or industrial, and in forms that overlap and coalesce. His art draws its energies from the enmeshed cultural elements and influences, politics and art history of the Philippines, at the same time that it thrives on contemporary regional challenges and on state-of-the-art computer and communications technologies—a rich and complex synthesis that makes any show by Tence Ruiz an event.

From July 1996 to 1998, Jose Tence Ruiz participated in a group show and held four one-man shows: a group show of digital imagery, a show of assemblages, and two of oil paintings. The pioneering group show entitled *Monumental* at SM Megamall Art Center in Mandaluyong, which also included works by Antipas Delotavo, Neil Doloricon, Al Manrique, and Noe Tiu among others, consisted of works using large format-digital imagery, the first time that such an exhibit was put together in the Philippines. Tence Ruiz, who was the guiding spirit of the show, explored the vast resources of computer technology applied to art making: drawing or painting with pixels or color units, scanning images from a vast universal photofile, modifying and collaging these images, combining them with elements of past and present work, and fusing computer with camera work. There is, in addition, the